

**STUDY OF THE IMPACTS OF
SCHOOL SAFETY LEGISLATION**
conducted for
The Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee

by
Praxis Research
Katherine A. Carlson, Ph.D.
Project Director

SUMMARY OF RESULTS - 1999 SURVEY OF JUVENILE COURTS

The 1997 Washington State Legislature took action related to ensuring school safety in E2SHB 1841, a bill that seeks to improve knowledge about safety risks posed by individual students as well as to increase the capacity for schools and teachers to address these risks and related problems. The Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (GJJAC) is responsible for studying the impacts of this legislation, and contracted with Praxis Research to conduct the study.

In late April, 1999, a questionnaire was sent to the administrator of the Juvenile Court for each of Washington State's 39 counties. The questionnaire sought information about the perceived extent of the problems of safety and security in the county's schools, information about how the requirements of the legislation were carried out, and any difficulties in implementation. A copy of the survey questions and overall responses is attached.

Characteristics of Responding school Districts:

A total of 36 completed surveys were returned for a response rate of 92%. Juvenile Courts in King, Yakima, and Whitman Counties did not return responses despite repeated contacts and requests. Combined courts serve Benton and Franklin Counties, and Ferry, Pend Orielle, and Stevens Counties – each responded and was counted separately by individual county.

Significant School Safety Problems:

The first survey question listed school safety concerns from the legislation and asked respondents to identify which of these were felt to be significant problems in the schools in their district.

- 83% of the respondents selected "disruptive behavior in the classroom" as a significant problem; 76% identified "violence or threats directed at other students and school staff;" and 66% marked "harassment of students and school staff."
- A majority of respondents also identified significant problems with alcohol and other drugs, with 59% marking "use of drugs and alcohol on campus" and 52% "sales of drugs and alcohol on campus."
- Issues associated with gangs were less frequently identified, with 41% indicating problems with "gang recruitment and intimidation" and 21% problems with "gang-related apparel and regalia."

- Asked to identify which of these behaviors was considered to be the single most significant disciplinary problem, 42% of the respondents picked disruptive behaviors in the classroom and on campus, 15% harassment or violence towards students and staff, and 15% use of drugs and alcohol on campus. The remaining respondents selected violence or threats directed at other students and staff (12%) or gang recruitment and intimidation (9%).

Practices for Notification of Schools:

Respondents provided a brief written description of how they notified schools when students were placed on diversion or had been adjudicated. These included information about the frequency of notification, how quickly it followed court action, and whether the information was delivered in written form or over the telephone. Thirty-five Juvenile Courts completed this question.

- Notification was typically done in writing, often using computerized print-outs or a standardized list or form. Several noted they used the JUVIS printout; others forwarded a copy of the court order or results of the disposition. Two counties, both small and rural, notified schools by telephone.
- A slight majority of Juvenile Courts (53%) provided this information to schools shortly after actions occur – either doing so immediately following disposition or on a regular weekly basis. Two provided information bi-weekly. Several of these Courts also sent schools a monthly JUVIS printout. Twelve counties responded that they sent out written reports to the schools on a monthly basis, also often using the JUVIS printout.
- The questionnaire also asked if the Court informed schools when students are admitted to or released from detention. This occurred in 80% of the counties. The probation officer/counselor, or a teacher or other staff members in the detention school made the contact with the schools. Information was typically exchanged with someone identified as the school contact, most often a school administrator or an attendance office staff person but also counselors and classroom teachers.
- When a student entered detention, the purpose of the contact was to obtain homework and other assignments to help the student stay current. It is not clear that contacts were as regularly made when the detention ended and the student was due to return to school. The comments suggest that information exchanges with the school did not necessarily occur when the stay in detention was brief.

Implementation and Response:

A related set of questions asked about the implementation of these policies and other procedures relating to school safety, specifically singling out elements called for in E2SHB 1841.

- The legislation calls for information to be provided in student records about a transferring student's previous involvement in violence or criminal behaviors. About two thirds of the Juvenile Courts reported they had helped school staff obtain this information for a new student entering the local schools from another district, although except for two counties, this was not done routinely. The remaining Courts – 34% - reported this was done rarely or never.

- Respondents were unlikely to have been asked by schools or Courts elsewhere to provide information about a former local student's involvement in violence or criminal behaviors when that student transferred to a school in another area: 37% indicated this had occurred but not regularly, with only one Court responding that this happened on a regular basis.
- The legislation also calls for the school principal to provide information about student convictions or diversion to all the student's teachers and other school personnel likely to be involved with the student. Respondents were asked if they believed this occurs in their local schools. Most (53%) indicated they had no knowledge of what was done with the information they gave to schools; 36% thought that this occurred at least occasionally, and 12% felt that it happened rarely or never.

Difficulties Implementing Legislation:

The survey form asked if the time required to provide information to the schools had been a burden for administrators or their staffs.

- A slight majority of respondents found the time required to provide information to schools was not particularly burdensome, although 42% agreed that, while not a big problem, it did require additional time; 14% responded that providing information did not require much time. A sizeable minority of the respondents – 45% - felt there was at least some burden due to the time necessary, with two (6%) feeling this was a major problem requiring significant additional time.

Survey respondents also were asked to identify any other difficulties, besides the extra time, that they had encountered or anticipated in implementing the legislation and its several requirements.

- 56% of the respondents identified some other problems or concerns with the legislation. Issues around confidentiality and the circulation of sensitive information were the most frequently identified additional concern, with several asking for clearer policies on the distribution of information among school staff. Others felt that too much information was going out without careful controls on who received it at the school.
- Respondents particularly singled out reports on Diversion participants, noting this was a process supposed to be confidential. A few identified problems with retaliatory school actions following notification. Wrote one respondent "Some schools in our county will kick a youth off of athletic teams if he enters diversion for MIP, etc., even when the offense occurred during the summer. Youth is punished twice." Another respondent added that there were "too many casual calls from schools fishing for dirt on kids and families."
- A few respondents expressed concerns about the types of offenses identified as reportable, questioning why some were required and others, such as theft, were not. Several respondents added to their previous response about time requirements with comments about unfunded legislative mandates and budget and funding cuts putting pressures on staff time. One respondent from a larger county noted the difficulties associated with diversity: "One juvenile court and many schools means different practices from school to school, different levels of investment, problems with communication, etc."

Comments and Suggestions:

The final question was a general request to expand on the experiences of the Juvenile Courts in dealing with the legislative actions. It asked if respondents felt these actions were helpful or not, and sought suggestions for other actions or practices courts might take that would contribute to improved school safety and reduced violence. Thirty-two respondents provided some written comment, 28% of which cited both advantages and disadvantages of the legislation. Separating these by content, 75% of the comments identified some concerns; 47% identified aspects that were felt to be beneficial.

- The favorable comments reflected on how the legislation was a positive step, with one such respondent noting “I believe any amount of information is helpful to provide safety to out schools and community.” Wrote another “I think they’re helpful. I believe we need to make our schools aware for safety issues.”
- Many of the comments or concerns repeated the issues raised in the previous request for identification of problems related to implementation. Several cited unfunded impacts on workloads and concerns about costs and payment responsibility. As this respondent remarked “Some are helpful and contribute to schools and justice system communication. But does impact work loads without funding.” Another pointed out how “each law that appears to be low cost continues to drain staff time at the county level and in the schools.”
- One county included responses from several staff, providing a varied set of favorable and unfavorable reactions. Commenting on lack of funding, this respondent nonetheless concluded that “improved communication (cooperation) between schools and juvenile courts should contribute to improved school safety/reduced violence. Wrote another: “Anytime people working with kids know more about the kids they work with, it’s a good thin. The mechanics of communicating that information in a consistent manner is the struggle.”
- These views were well summarized in the following comments from other counties: “To be empowered to interact freely with schools is beneficial. To have the manner directed is burdensome as it sets procedures for a system when reality is (that) there are differences in local systems sometimes made less effective by legislative micromanaging.” Another respondent offered a more critical response to the legislation: “These legislative actions are myopic and don’t address the real issues of youth behavior that is dysfunctional. It allows legislators to say that they did something without really investing in solving the problem. Probably does more harm than good.”
- Other typical unfavorable comments repeated previously identified issues associated with confidentiality and information sharing. One respondent wrote: “I think this has destroyed the confidentiality of the Diversion process. Once that info hits the school building, it’s all over – no matter how many times you stamp ‘confidential’ all over the letter.” Another remarked “Diversion should be confidential,” adding the suggestion that “All felonies should require notification.”
- The most extended comment provided a detailed analysis of shortcomings in the legislation. Beginning with the statement that the legislation was “not particularly helpful,” the respondent went on to iterate concerns about impacts on youth in diversion and other concerns about inappropriate use of the information. Finding these exchanges not always “informative” or “useful,” the respondent suggested the advantages of a clear identification of the purpose and desired outcomes of these contacts and the need for clear parameters on information sharing. Included as well were references to schools not always responding to requests for information about educational specifics.

- Several comments offered other specific suggestions to improve actions. These included interest in capacity to act preventatively, noting “there should be some mechanism to allow sharing of information before kids are in the system. Schools generally can recognize potential problems but are limited in sharing of that information until it is too late.” Others suggested placing probation officers or police in the schools and faster judicial action on new charges.